



SOUNDCRAFT Si COMPACT

With the release into the wild of the Si Compact the habitat of the small-format analogue console is under threat.

Text: Gareth Stuckey

 Soundcraft has always made great consoles. Way back in 1974 it released the first ever mass-produced console built into a roadcase (the Series 1). Then it all but changed the way live mixing consoles were designed with the groundbreaking '8 & 8' (groups and auxes) setup that's a standard today (or a bare minimum at least). It seems curious to note then that Soundcraft was also one of the *last* console manufacturers to step on board the digital bandwagon. Nearly every other manufacturer had released both small and large format digital production consoles before Soundcraft even put its foot in the water. Now it's finally on board and making a big splash with a wide range of digital options!

The first of these new-generation consoles was the Vi Series. These consoles were developed alongside its Studer brethren, and feature BSS EQ and Lexicon effects. They're amazing boards; the Vi6 in particular is my standard console request on the production rider whenever I request a digital board. Even though Soundcraft has expanded its range since then, the main points and operating features have essentially remained the same. The newest offering from Soundcraft is the Si Compact. This small-format digital console is available in 16-, 24 and 32-channel versions – I've been trialling the 24-channel version, which somewhat confusingly, only has 22 faders!

COMPACT & FLUORESCENT

As has become the norm with digital consoles, the faders of the diminutive Si Compact are arranged in six 'layers', with the default setting in this instance being Layer A: featuring mic inputs 1-22. Layer B presents the two 'missing' mic inputs 23 & 24 as a linked pair alongside all the stereo

inputs and FX returns. Then there's a layer for bus outputs, MTX (matrix) outputs, and Graphic EQ – Low and High.

It's slightly odd having the last two mic inputs on the second layer, I must say, but there's a technical reason for it. According to the manufacturer the fader layer system is designed around the mechanical requirements of the smallest console (which has room for 14 faders + masters) and the Vi I/O system, which is built in blocks of 8 (14 + 8 = 22). The 'unused' faders will apparently be employed in future software releases where more input channels are made available when using additional I/O, and for fader re-mapping to allow a channel to appear on *both* layers

To make the console easy to navigate, Soundcraft has implemented a great function called Fader Glow, where each 'type' of fader is illuminated in a different colour. This makes the quick identification of which 'layer' (or status if you like) the faders are currently controlling a total no-brainer – assuming you're not colour-blind. It significantly reduces the confusion associated with layers of this nature and prevents you from getting lost and accidentally adjusting something you've mistaken for something else. For example, if the faders are currently acting as Graphic EQ faders, they glow red.

FADERS AIN'T FADERS

Each channel on the Compact also features a rotary encoder, although the use of this control is reasonably limited. The encoder can be assigned to gain, high-pass filter frequency, or pan, and act as the 'channel to bus pan' function when mixing to a stereo bus. Hopefully future firmware updates will expand this encoder's capacity

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further. I would like to be able to assign it, for instance, to an aux send, since the only other way to change send levels is to enter the fader layer that controls them – or ‘Follow’ mode as Soundcraft refers to it. Problem is, when you do this, you’re immediately thrust into the world of my pet hate – losing control of your mix faders. This is actually the biggest issue I have with the console overall. Aside from this, however, using the console is pretty simple, as it should be. Indeed, my first outing with the board was in the heat of battle at South by Southwest with no soundcheck and only a 20-minute changeover. Mercifully, I didn’t run into any major surprises during the set. What you see is what you get with the Si Compact. Use the rotary encoder to gain up a channel, press the select button on the channel you want to alter, and, hey presto, all of its controls are available on the ‘ACS’ (Assignable Channel Strip), ie: the clearly defined phalanx of knobs at the top of the board! (See pic.)

This control strip is broken up into five logical sections: input (with phase, 48V, gain and high-pass filter), a fully featured gate, a comprehensive compressor, a quality four-band EQ, and an output section incorporating delay and pan.

It’s great to see phase and phantom power easily accessible here – on far too many other digital consoles these functions are buried several layers down. This is one of the primary selling points of the Si Compact; even though it’s a small format console there’s a dedicated control for every function. This is why the touchscreen at the top-left of the board is relatively small – it’s not really required all that often. Frankly, it only comes into play when performing utility functions like naming and storing mixes, since every other control has a dedicated encoder. The upshot of all this is that I found I used the console more like an analogue board – it’s intuitive and fast to get around.

BUGBEARS

A couple of things bugged me from the outset though. Firstly, like some other lower-cost digital consoles, the gain pot ‘clicks’ when you adjust it. It’s as if the gain is stepped and the result is clearly audible through the PA on vocals. While it’s not the biggest drama in the world – assuming you set your gains at soundcheck and don’t change them – and even though it’s apparent on other consoles at the same price point, it does mean a live recording with the console is essentially impossible.

While the illuminated soft-touch buttons are very nice, I was also somewhat perturbed by the ‘On’ and ‘Select’ buttons being so close together. I would have preferred to see the On button directly below the gain pot, followed by the meters (which show both input and gain reduction/gate operation for each channel) and then the Select and Solo buttons above the fader. In other words, separate the On and Select buttons with the meters. This would substantially reduce the possibility of accidentally switching a channel off mid show – something that’s too easy to do when it’s not actually a mechanical switch.

Another little oddity here is that the ‘Select’ button doesn’t follow the Solo, nor does there seem to be an option anywhere to make it do so. This is probably only really a concern if you were mixing monitors, as it does make it very easy to make the mistake of changing settings on one (selected) channel accidentally while listening to another (that’s soloed). Partly this issue



It might be compact but the Si has a seriously crammed rear panel; including 24 mic/line inputs and 16 outputs, all on XLR.

NEED TO KNOW



Price

16-Channel: \$11,495
24-Channel: \$14,995
32-Channel: \$17,995
(but expect to find them going for substantially less than that in your local pro audio shop.)

Contact

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Pros

Dedicated control for every function.
Great sounding inbuilt EQ and compressor.
Graphic on every output setup as standard.

Cons

Routing limitations.
Limited visual feedback on screen.

Summary

For the size and cost, this is an awesome console. Expect to see the Compact turning up where previously only an LS9 would be – a great step forward.

is one of familiarity of course, but it's also about intuition, especially when you're thrown onto the board with no guidance let alone time to read the manual – never a good look mid-show!

Having said all that, the console does really sound good. Most notably, the EQ sounds *real*, just like EQ should. It doesn't sound digital, the way some other cheap digital consoles (or even some expensive ones) can when boosted. The compressor works well, and the meters on every channel are very helpful.

MIX INTERROGATOR

The console is also remarkably quick to set up thanks to a feature called Interrogate. This offers a quick way of changing the status of any switch function in the Assignable Channel Strip across many channels. For example: to check the status of the LR routing switch from Inputs to the main LR bus, all you need to do is hold down the LR routing key of any channel, whereupon the Select keys on any other channels routed to LR will light up. While keeping the LR key pressed you can then toggle the status of the LR routing on any channels by pressing the Select keys of the channels you wish to include (or exclude) from the routing. Having the ability to perform simple tasks like assigning phantom, turning on HPFs and compressors with such a no-fuss approach means you can be up and running very quickly on the Compact without having to flick through endless pages. Fantastic.

HIDDEN EXTRAS

In addition to the usual mixing console functions, there are several digital console extras on the Si Compact that many of us have grown accustomed to. The standout principle here though is the quality of those extras. There are four FX engines provided by Lexicon, which have dedicated aux buses *in addition* to the 14 auxes and four matrixes already available. There are, however, some routing limitations. For instance, they always return to their allocated faders on Layer B, so even if you were mixing a solo artist with only two or three inputs, you would still need to flip to the second layer to change your reverb returns. Boring. And as already mentioned, the limitation of the rotary channel encoder means that the only way to send to your FX is to enter Follow mode.

The Si Compact also features a 28-band graphic EQ from BSS on every bus, each and every aux, matrix, and master bus! This means there's no need to 'patch' the GEQ, just enable it whenever it's required, with no risk of running out of DSP and no audible interruption. These graphics are

controlled by changing the fader layer to either Graphic Lo or Hi so that the console faders become representative of the Graphic EQ faders. I love the fact that these EQs are already in place and don't need to be manually assigned or patched. Very cool.

There are some other extra features on the Si Compact that really illustrate how Soundcraft have listened to digital console users. I know the ol' 'listening to users' line sounds like a tattered cliché nowadays but in this case it's true. One example I personally love is the fact the console offers four *analogue* insert send/returns. Lots of engineers still carry a must-have vocal chain for instance – myself included – and this feature makes inserting that chain a doddle.

But you can't have everything, as they say. There are some other things that are notably absent from the console. For instance, while inputs can be soft-patched – as we have all become accustomed – here there are some major, and somewhat irritating, limitations (and I'm not trying to be pedantic or contrary here just for the sake of it). Firstly, there's no way to assign the L/R Mix directly to Mono/C. Currently you have to select mono on every single channel and bus should you want to send a copy of the mix to mono for instance (for say a delay or infill send). It's also impossible to separate the main L and R output levels or the left and right controls on the graphic EQ. On the latter, if you're in an odd sounding room and want to EQ the left and right separately, there's no way to do it (one of the reasons why I still insist on outboard analogue graphics!). Channel input patching is also very limited. For example, there is currently no way to select the Stereo Return TRS jacks or internal FX returns to be available as input options for the Mono channels so that, as mentioned earlier, if you had a small mix and were not using all the mono channels you could lay your mix out across Layer A only.

I can only hope that a lot of these 'little' problems will be solved as software updates become available for the console. If that happens the Si Compact will become a very solid console for the price point, and I will expect to see a lot of them showing up where previously there might have been the likes of a Yamaha LS9 or M7CL. ■



MANUFACTURER'S RIGHT OF REPLY

Regarding the assignment of the L/R Mix directly to Mono/C:

It was the intention of the design that if a mono sum (or similar) of the buses were required this would be achieved using a matrix bus. The reason for this approach is it allows the 'mono' mix to be created from a sum of left, right and mono for those using the mono as a true centre bus.